

Introduction to Snowshoeing

Theme: *Snowshoeing is a great outdoor winter activity!*

Background

The most interesting facts about snowshoes:

- They were a North American invention over 3,000 years ago.
- They are, as history shows, the best way to get across the snow.

The History

Before the invention of snowshoes vast regions of the world were virtually unreachable. Without snowshoes, there was no easy way for humans to successfully settle the north, as there was no efficient means to hunt, trap, or explore.

Snowshoes spurred the earliest migrations from Central Asia north into Siberia and Scandinavia. When some of those same early aboriginal people completed their long trek across the Bering Straits to North America, they did so on snowshoes. The first Europeans who settled in North America found Native Americans wearing snowshoes from Labrador to the Great Plains.

Snowshoeing flourished among the native people in North America. Before long, savvy European trappers, hunters, explorers, and surveyors adopted snowshoes as their own. Some of those earliest snowshoers wore shoes more than 7 feet in length, which helped navigate in the deep powdery snow.

As the natives of Canada and Alaska continued to evolve the design of snowshoes, they looked to nature's own footprints for inspiration. Animals, whose feet had adapted for over snow travel, became models for different snowshoe types. The beavertail and bearpaw snowshoes, are two such styles that remain in use today. The beavertail, the most popular traditional style, has a round nose with the ends coming

Age

All ages

Time

½ to 2 hours

Outline

Introduction

Activity Stations

Background Info

Snowshoe Hike

Wrap up

Meeting

Clean up

together in a long tail. The bearpaw, as its name implies, is short and wide with a round tail. Both styles have had enormous influence on modern snowshoe design.

By the turn of the century, the snowshoe had evolved to a point where some styles were fewer than 3 feet in length. It wasn't just the length of snowshoes that was changing. Snowshoeing itself had become more than simply a means of winter transportation. The growth of cities, and a shift from a farming to an industrial culture, meant that most people no longer needed snowshoes to trap, hunt, or forage for their winter food. Instead, they took to the woods for recreation. It was at this time that snowshoeing developed as a full-fledged winter sporting activity, particularly in the rugged backwoods of northern New England and Eastern Canada. Large sporting organizations were formed to advance and celebrate the sport.

Some legendary snowshoeing clubs of Canada's Quebec Province had more than 200 members who wore flamboyant costumes on their outings. Snowshoe clubs often had their own drum and bugle corps, flags and banners, officers, scouts, and even mascots. Beyond arranging racing meets, these clubs organized purely social outings where members would gather for an evening, and snowshoe by moonlight to an outlying inn or tavern. After eating and drinking, club members would then snowshoe home.

Despite its popularity as a sport, the overall design and materials used in making snowshoes remained essentially the same as they had been for hundreds of years. Ash was still the wood of choice, and untanned cowhide was considered the best material for webbing. Styles, too, were very similar, with differences most often manifested in the length of the snowshoe tail, or the width of the frame.

Program Activities

Introduction

Objective: To introduce the snowshoeing.

Explain that they are going to learn about snowshoeing. Ask why people go snowshoeing? (exercise, get outdoors in winter, fight cabin fever, to travel in deep snow, adventure....) Explain that the group will learn all about snowshoeing and how much fun it is.

Safety!

Before going on a snowshoeing hike, check the local weather forecast. When snowshoeing with a group, make sure that everyone is comfortable with the pace and demands of the trail. Keep a count of the number of people in your group. Do not snowshoe in an unsafe area or a high risk area, such as thin ice (less than 8").

Background information

Objective: To help participants understand the basic information they need to know before they "get into" snowshoeing.

Use the following background information to cover the history, equipment, techniques, safety tips, what to wear, and etc. about snowshoeing.

Clothing

On Your Body – A layering system is very important:

- First layer – light weight and breathable, avoid cotton garments
- Second layer – insulation, light weight fleece or wool
- Outer layer – water proof/resistance and wind proof materials

On Your Feet – Keep your feet dry. Remember you are going for a hike and your footwear should reflect that.

- Boots – If going on a long hike, a pair of stable, comfortable and waterproof hiking boots are suggested
 - Gaiters – These are an essential part of your clothing when snowshoeing and keeping snow out of boots and ankles warm
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- Socks – Look for socks made of moisture moving materials. If needed, a light liner under a medium or heavy weight sock is recommended. This is the best way to keep your feet dry and blister free.

Choosing your snowshoe

Here are some general factors to keep in mind as you make your choice:

- A large, wide snowshoe is the best choice for soft, deep snow because its greater surface area supports your weight on the snow surface more readily.
- A narrow snowshoe works best for traversing side hills.
- A snowshoe with an upturned toe makes for the easiest down hill walking. Unlike a flat-toed model, the tips won't slide under the snow to cause a "face-plant."
- A snowshoe with a long tail "tracks" well, meaning that the tails help lift the toes out of the snow when you take a step in deep soft snow, this aids in preventing you from catching a tip.
- A short snowshoe provides better maneuverability in negotiating tight timber or other obstacle-strewn terrain.

Most snowshoes combine these characteristics to varying degrees, but snowshoe expert Gene Prater divides them into four basic categories: the Yukon, the beavertail, the bearpaw, and the Western. The Western has been the most popular as the first shoe to replace the traditional steamed and bent white-ash frame and raw cowhide webbing with an aluminum frame and a nylon "deck".

Other Equipment and Supplies

- Poles – An easy, affordable, tool that will help your snowshoes work for you. Poles not only help lend stability in any kind of condition, but they can also be used to help propel you forward. Expandable poles are ideal for probing in avalanche situations.
 - Day Pack – Usually the last thing remembered, this item is useful to carry all safety and personal items on your snowshoeing journey.
 - Waist Pack – For the brief snowshoe hike, essential items can carry easily in a simple waist pack.
 - Snow Shovel – A great safety tool for avalanche situations and always helpful when setting up a lunch spot or camp site.
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- Ice Axe – For the serious adventurer or mountaineer, the ice axe is a necessity when crossing steep and icy terrain.
- First Aid Kit
- Water – Ample water. Plan on one quart of water per person per hour.
- Extra food or Energy bars
- Compass and Trail Map
- Dry Socks

Technique

Snowshoeing is as easy as walking. The beginning snowshoer should be ready to head out on a trail in minutes.

- Climbing – To ascend a slope, kick to front of your snowshoe into the snow and press a step. To avoid collapse, always make sure that each new step is sufficiently above the last one.
- Descending – Heel cleats are the key to an easy descent. Try to keep your knees bent slightly, lean back, and keep your weight on your heel cleats in order to maintain control.
- Edging – An important technique for traversing a slope. Simply kick the side of the shoe into the hillside engaging the cleats. Seeing the boot heel hard toward the uphill slope, then stomp down securing the snowshoe edge into the slope. Poles are very helpful while edging.
- Breaking Trail – Walk in a single line behind the leader's trail. When it's your turn to lead, take consistent even steps that are easy for everyone who is following.

Snowshoe Hike

Materials

- Snowshoes
- Poles
- First aid kit
- Cell phone
- Example pack with first aid kit, cell phone, water, dry socks, energy bars

Objective: To give participants hands-on experience with snowshoeing!

Before you go outside, explain how to put on snowshoes. Demonstrate this with a shoe in a snowshoe so all can see. Spend time discussing how to put the bindings on tight and right, or you will spend the whole hike helping people put on snowshoes! Remind folks that we will go as a group – an important safety and courtesy rule. The adult leader will break trail and stay in front. An adult will also bring up the rear, and

will be able to help you if your bindings loosen. We will put on snowshoes outside. Tell youth that they must walk in single file, and that they cannot start walking until everyone has their snowshoes on and is ready (so stay seated folks!).

If you have enough adults, you can break into two groups – the “radical death-seekers” and the “take time to smell the roses” groups. The Radical group will go down a “steep” hill, onto the river (ice!), over logs, through woods, to grandmother’s house we go! The roses group will take an easier pace – maybe check out the scat, and smell that!

After you have gone over all the instructions, then let them go pick out their snowshoe and start putting them on. Adults should help tighten bindings and watch for twisted heel straps and toes that are not all the way in the shoe.

Commence your hike when all are ready. Keep an eye out for those who are getting cold. No frostbite allowed!

Do not go on the ice unless the thickness has been tested recently.

Be positive as you hike, visit with folks, help those who have problems, let the leader know if you are getting behind – you need to stay together as a group.

There are fun things to do as you hike:

- Run up and down hills
 - Have races – walking races, running races, hopping races
 - Climb/Jump over logs
 - Take deer trails and marvel at all the neat places you can go
 - Go by neat stuff like beaver dams (careful! Ice is thinner here!) and critter dens, etc.
 - Have people pick out animal trails and follow them and see where they go. Make sure you set boundaries first – or tell them to stay within sight of you.
 - Play games in snowshoes (tag, everybody is it, etc.)
 - Set up an obstacle course and have an obstacle course relay -identical courses: weave in and out of cones, frog hop over milk crate, and turn 5 times around bat with head on it, then come back and hop over milk crate, and weave in and out of cones. Then tag the next person. Team tat finishes first wins!
 - Do a spoon and egg relay race
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- Follow the Leader Animal Tracks – have kids imitate rabbits hopping; Pheasant two-legged running; skunk diagonal running pattern, etc.
- What track pattern am I? Have kids turn backs, you either run, hop, walk, or skip on fresh snow. Have them turn around and guess what you did. Do all three times, guess what animals make these different track patterns.